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Aging Officials Seeking Permanent Funding For Senior Meals

By Betsy Finklea

“A godsend” –that’s what some Dillon County senior citizens are calling the five weekly blast frozen meals that they were receiving from the Dillon County Council For The Aging.

As of February 19th, the funding for these meals ended, and since there was no extra money in the region, the Dillon County senior citizens who were receiving meals are no longer getting them.

“These meals allowed these seniors to have access to a well-balanced meal five days a week that they could microwave at their convenience,” said Joni Spivey, director of the Dillon County Council For The Aging. “The money that they would have spent on a noon day meal could be used to help with other expenses, such as medicine, pay bills, gas, etc. The majority of those who received these meals are older seniors who are in bad health, live alone and in a very frail condition.”

The money used to fund the program was part of one-time State Supplemental Funds that were to be used for the expansion of Home and Community Based Services with an emphasis on nutrition needs. The \$2.9 million needed to fund the effort statewide is tentatively back in the House version of the state budget, and supporters are hoping to see it be apart of the Senate Version. The Lieutenant Governor’s Office On Aging, the AARP, and local providers are working to make the funding a permanent part of the budget.

In Dillon County, 300 meals per week (five per person) were being sent to 60 senior citizens; however, since January 2007, 110 senior citizens had been served by the program. Spivey said the majority of these blast frozen meals were provided to rural senior citizens who were not on the hot meal route due to funding or the inability to keep the meal hot on delivery. The average age of the people receiving the meals was 78 years old.

“These meals helped not only the senior but also gave peace of mind to their family knowing that they were receiving this service. These meals definitely helped keep some of these seniors in their homes for a longer period of time,” said Spivey.

“The sad part is that since the funds have already run out, we have had to already place these 60 seniors back on our waiting list. As we can, we will try to add them to our hot meal route if they are local,” she said.

Mrs. Cora Williams of Dillon, who was receiving the meals, said she enjoyed them and that they were nice.

Mrs. Hilda Harrelson of Lake View was also receiving the meals. "I think they are a godsend," said Harrelson. Harrelson that due to trouble with her feet it has been hard for her to stand any length of time. She said the meals really helped. Harrelson said the meals were delicious and that there were a variety of the healthy meals provided. All she had to do was microwave them for about 6-8 minutes, and they were ready to enjoy.

Harrelson said the meals had been a blessing to a neighbor of hers as well who is in a wheelchair.

She said the meals help people who really need them.

Some of the recipients of the meals participated in a paper plate campaign to try to help bring the Governor's attention to the matter. Recipients wrote a message on a paper plate about why they needed the meals. Some included a photo.

The Dillon County Council For The Aging sent approximately 85 plates to the Governor, who has not shown support for making the funding permanent. If the funding is not included in the budget, 5,500 South Carolina senior citizens could lose their meals.

According to a hunger study by Harvest Hope Food Bank, "National hunger studies have consistently found that many seniors must choose between paying for food or paying for other necessities such as rent or mortgage, medicine or medical care, or utilities like heating/air or water." Further, "For these seniors, going without food can result in malnutrition which leads to declining health and increased health costs.

The costs of seniors suffering from hunger-related illnesses are eventually carried by the local economy-through increased health care costs."

The receipt of the meals can be what stands between a senior citizen ending up in a hospital due to not receiving the proper nourishment or in a nursing home.

An overnight hospital stay can range as much as \$20,000-\$25,000 for someone over 65 and placement in a nursing home usually averages about \$45,000 a year.

Providing a regular, well-balanced meal five days a week is much less expensive. Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer is "optimistic lawmakers will retain the funds in the budget, and hopes that they will realize the importance of making these funds permanent."

“When I have gone to the legislature with aging issues, they have responded,” he said.

“This funding is important to our seniors, in Dillon we were able to provide services to 110 people that we were not able to help before. I think that if you asked them, they would tell you that this money is very important, and a budget cut would certainly make a difference to them.”

“This is really a nonpartisan issue, they realize how important this program is and I hope they will help support our seniors,” said Lt. Gov. Bauer.

“I have received calls, as has the staff at the Office on Aging, supporting our efforts to secure the funds to keep this program going. When folks have asked me what they can do to help. I have encouraged them to contact their legislators and from what I am hearing, they are.”

Senator Kent Williams said, “I will do everything within my power to make certain our senior citizens are taken care of, not just with the meal program, but with the many other programs that are available and necessary to assist our aging population. It is because of our seniors that this country is what it is today. When I am a senior, I hope that the future generations will be there to take care of me, as I will strive to do for our current seniors. They have provided for us and now it is time for us to take care of them.”

Senator Dick Elliott said he will be supporting funds to continue meals for our senior citizens.

The Dillon County Council For The Aging’s director hopes that the funds will become permanent. “These funds need to become permanent due to the fact that our senior population is growing in number and living longer,” said Spivey.

“Therefore, we have a greater number of seniors who are frail, economically challenged, in poor health and deserve to be helped to remain in their homes independently for as long as possible.”

The AARP has set up a toll-free number that the public can call to request their support to make the funding permanent. The number is 1-866-687-2277. The public can also call the Governor’s Office to let their feelings be known at 1-866-300-9333 or their local legislators-Sen. Kent Williams (Columbia #803-212-6008), Sen. Dick Elliott (Columbia #803-212-6000) or Rep. Jackie Hayes (Columbia # 803-734-3099).